

FACT SHEET:

COURT CONSIDERS \$15 BILLION NEVADA WATER MINING SCHEME



Photo of Upper Spring Valley by Rob Mrowka

A federal judge will hear arguments July 31 in Las Vegas, Nev., in a case that could determine whether the Southern Nevada Water Authority can proceed with a massive groundwater project and pipeline. [The project](#) would siphon more than 7.8 billion gallons of precious groundwater each year from public lands in the eastern Nevada desert, pumping it more than 250 miles south to metropolitan Las Vegas.

The controversial \$15.5 billion project threatens people's livelihoods, fish and wildlife, and Nevada's natural heritage. This water grab has been the subject of several lawsuits from conservation groups, including the Center for Biological Diversity, White Pine County, tribes and local communities.

DESERT ECOSYSTEM AT RISK

In the valleys of eastern Nevada, deep aquifers and desert springs sustain an incredible array of wildlife and support water use and ranches for American Indian tribes and other rural communities. Unsustainable groundwater pumping would drain these critical aquifers, springs and seeps, risking irreparable harm to endangered species that depend on this water. The pipeline project would undermine more than 200 square miles of public and private lands that include portions of the [Pahranagat, Moapa Valley and desert national wildlife refuges](#), [Great Basin National Park](#) and [Basin and Range National Monument](#). There are sustainable alternatives to meeting the water needs of Las Vegas that would avoid permanently draining the desert dry, threatening wildlife and rare plants, and upending rural communities.

HISTORY

The Southern Nevada Water Authority —the water agency for Las Vegas, Henderson and North Las Vegas — applied for groundwater rights in eastern and central Nevada in 1989 to supplement Colorado River water and support future growth. In 2013 a Nevada state district court [denied the request](#), ordering the state engineer to recalculate how much water is available within those basins and establish mitigation standards. Hearings are scheduled this fall.

To construct the 263-mile pipeline, the Water Authority requested a right of way across public lands managed by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management. The [BLM's final environmental impact statement](#) was released in 2012, but it failed to show that the project complied with federal law. The pipeline proposal represents the largest water appropriation in Nevada history and likely the largest interbasin transfer of water in U.S. history. The affected basins are almost the size of New England.

THE LAWSUIT

In February 2014 the Center [sued](#) the BLM in U.S. District Court to stop the right-of-way and protect more than 200 square miles of terrestrial and 5,000 acres of wetlands and meadow habitat, 200 springs and 33 miles of perennial streams that would be irreparably harmed by the project. Beloved species including the greater sage grouse, pronghorn, mule deer, Bonneville cutthroat trout, [southwestern willow flycatcher](#), desert fish, [springsnails](#), bats,



Burrowing owl in Nevada courtesy USFWS

pygmy rabbits, kangaroo mice and burrowing owls would be devastated by habitat destruction.

The Center is asking the court to order BLM to prepare a supplemental environmental impact statement and to halt the project until the agency shows it complies with the law.

The BLM:

- Failed to consider and include significant new scientific information, including [new climate change science](#), and the Nevada state court decision;
- Failed to consider the combined, severe environmental impacts of the pipeline and climate change on affected resources;
- Failed to consider significant relevant factors concerning the BLM's mitigation plans, including thresholds for when additional mitigation would be required;
- Failed to show the pipeline and efforts to mitigate its impact wouldn't endanger sensitive wildlife and plant habitat protected in the Ely Resource Management Plan;
- Illegally granted a permanent right-of-way across public lands in White Pine County.

The Center's goal is to protect the public lands and the rare and imperiled plant and animal species that depend on this precious water. BLM's environmental impact statement acknowledges that the project would have significant impacts on the people and communities in the project area that depend on public lands.

A second lawsuit was filed by a broad coalition of citizens groups, American Indian tribes and rural governments, including White Pine County, Nev.

These two lawsuits have been consolidated with the Center's lawsuit. Both cases will be heard on July 31 before U.S. District Judge Andrew P. Gordon.

Sustainable Ways to Address Las Vegas Water Needs
Approximately 90 percent of metro Las Vegas's water comes from the Colorado River, which is vastly over-appropriated and declining due to climate change. Thirsty southern Nevada needs water, but the answer is not sucking eastern Nevada desert valleys dry by pumping an unsustainable amount of ancient groundwater through a massive pipeline to support uncontrolled growth. Sustainable solutions are needed, such as increased indoor and outdoor water conservation, reasonable limits on sprawl and re-evaluating how the Colorado River is managed and used. A [report by the Pacific Institute](#) found that if Las Vegas adopted more aggressive indoor and outdoor water conservation measures, it could save some 28 billion gallons a year without laying a single costly pipeline. That's three and a half times more water than the pipeline would provide.

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The [Center for Biological Diversity](#) is a national, nonprofit conservation organization with more than 1.3 million members and online activists dedicated to the protection of endangered species and wild places.